A

SERMON,

DELIVERED BEFORE

THE FIRST UNIVERSALIST SOCIETY IN PORTLAND,

ON THE

SABBATH EVENING, MARCH 15, 1829.

BY THOMAS F. KING,
OF PORTSMOUTH, N. H.

"These shall go away into everlasting punishment; but the righteous into life eternal."—*Matthew* xxv. 46.

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SERMON.

MATTHEW XXV. 46.

AND THESE SHALL GO AWAY INTO EVERLASTING PUNISHMENT; BUT THE RIGHTEOUS INTO LIFE ETERNAL.

The present age is highly distinguished for its liberality and the spirit of inquiry which it fosters.

It would, however, be foreign from the purposes for which we have assembled this evening, to enter into a particular discussion of the causes which may have produced a state of things so favorable to the spread of rational christianity. Suffice it to say, that a satisfactory answer to every question touching this subject, may be found in the character and spirit of our civil and religious institutions. These considerations, my brethren, afford occasions of gratitude to that great and good Being whose propitious providence hath planted us in the soil of freedom—in a land where the natural and inalienable rights of man are asserted and maintained with a glorious enthusiasm.

The liberty of conscience evidently ranks with the highest class of our immunities. For the mind of man is so constituted by his Maker, that perhaps, in the wide range of the human family, there are not two individuals to be found who will view any proposition in exactly the same point of light, when it is not susceptible of a clear, precise, or mathematical demonstration. Hence we may trace the inefficiency of all the laws, which misguided legislators have enacted, for the avowed purpose of producing a strict conformity of faith.

And may we not, my brethren, on the authority of these facts, declare that it is the height of arrogance—that it is a most unwarrantable assumption for any man to take upon himself a character which makes even the slightest approach to that of infallible dictator in matters of religion? I humbly trust, my brethren, for the honor of God, and your own peace, that none of you will ever so far forget your religious liberty, as to concede to any man, or body of men, the right of spiritual domination;—but that you may, as the freemen of Christ, acknowledge the paramount authority of the scriptures in all matters which relate to faith or practice.

It is presumed that there are some present who may have been attracted hither by curiosity, that esteem the speaker as an advocate of a most dangerous heresy—of a heresy which, if persisted in, will land him in the regions of never ending night. I would therefore entreat those who may thus think, to lay aside their prejudices, for a few moments, and to judge of the sentiments of your humble servant, in relation to the subject now proposed for discussion, according to the measure of evidence he shall adduce in their support.

Have Universalists, so far as you have had an opportunity of observing their conduct, exhibited such a recklessness of all prudential considerations, as to justify the conclusion that they would jeopardize their eternal welfare, for the mere gratification of differing from the multitude?

Do you suppose that, as parents, they would deliberately administer a moral poison to their offspring, whose deleterious effects will be felt throughout a miserable eternity? Or, in other words, will you say that they are a band of hypocrites, who while pretending to support the doctrine of universal benevolence, are yet secretly conscious of its utter hopelessness and falsity?

Declarations are often made from the pulpit and the press, which, if true, would indelibly fix upon us such an execrable character. Yes, even the humble virtue of sincerity in the principles we profess, as well as the christian name, is withheld from us, in order to check our influence upon the public mind.

Against such a formidable array of ignorance and prejudice combined, the advocate of universal salvation has to force his way. And to those who are but tolerably acquainted with the philosophy of the human mind, this will by no means appear an easy task. For the prejudices of education, and especially those which relate to the subject of religion, possess the most stubborn and unyielding character. They insensibly take possession of our understanding, and extend more or less of their influence to the remotest period of our lives. Under their influence, men who are unaccustomed to deep reflection, or who take their religion upon trust, associate certain ideas with particular passages of scripture, which vanish immediately upon their being examined by the light of reason. This is especially the case respecting the popular conceptions of our text. Tradition has fixed an impression upon the minds of thousands, that it contains a prophetic declaration of the decisions which the judge of all will have pronounced upon the righteous and the wicked, at some unknown period of futurity called the day of judgment and the last judgment. The immaculate Redeemer, who while on earth went about doing good—who opened the eyes of the blind—who unstopped the ears of the deaf—who poured the richest consolation into the hearts of the afflicted, and who while stretched upon the cross, could pray even for his murderers, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"—we are gravely told by some of his mistaken fol-

lowers, will lay aside, on the occasion to which they refer our text, the mild qualities of the lamb, —assume a ferocity infinitely worse than that of the hyena of the desert, and being thus malignantly arrayed, will burst forth upon the myriads of his enemies and hurl them to never ending ruin.

Who that seriously contemplates the possibility of such a wretched destiny, can feel grateful for existence? Our obligations to the Deity arise from the benefits he has conferred upon us, but if he has forced existence upon us under circumstances of exposure to perpetual perdition, existence is manifestly a curse, rather than a blessing. Those arguments, therefore, which are designed to vindicate the character of God from such unworthy and illiberal imputations, have a most unquestionable claim to your candid consideration.

The first object of your speaker will be to show that the popular application of our text is erroneous.

II. He will endeavor to point out the inconclusiveness of one of the most plausible arguments which modern theologians have used in support of the doctrine of endless misery; and

III. He will endeavor to prove the final salvation of the very persons of whom it is said, "These shall go away into everlasting punishment."

We have already hinted at the prevailing application of this passage and its immediate connexion —that it is thought to be descriptive of the concluding circumstances of a most tremendous judgment, which is to take place after the resurrection of the dead—the change of all the living, and the destruction of the solar system. But as it is our purpose to disprove such an interpretation of the passage, we shall ground our first argument upon the total silence which the passage maintains, respecting the two material facts just mentioned. "When the Son of man shall come

in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory. And before him shall be gathered all nations; and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats. And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the king say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was a hungered and ye gave me meat; I was thirsty and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me in; Naked and ye clothed me; I was sick and ye visited me; I was in prison and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee a hungered, and fed thee; or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the king shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: For I was an hungered, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: Naked and ye clothed me not: Sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye did it not unto one of the least of these, ye did it not unto me. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment; but the righteous into life eternal."

I have read this parable entire for the sole purpose of showing you, that it does not contain the most distant allusion to the resurrection of all men from the dead, or of any man; and that it is equally silent as it respects the destruction of the world. But is it not strange, if Jesus intended by this parable to teach the doctrine of a general judgment after the resurrection, that he should have carefully concealed such facts and circumstances as modern divines consider so essential to the doctrine?

Again—the erroneous application of our text, may be argued from another consideration; that in all those passages of scripture where the doctrine of a resurrection from a mortal to an immortal state is clearly taught, we find no mention of a dreadful judgment which is to follow, involving the wretchedness of a solitary soul of man. In 1 Cor. xv. Paul has confessedly given the most circumstantial description of the resurrection, which is to be found either in the old or new testament. But we may look in vain, throughout that masterly production, for the slightest intimation of an after judgment. On the contrary, we find him laboring to convince his brethren, that the loss which mankind universally have sustained by their connexion with the first Adam, will be abundantly repaid by their relation to the second. "For as in Adam all die, *even so in Christ shall all be made alive*," v. 22. "And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly," v. 49. Such were the sentiments Paul connected with the resurrection, and there can be no question but what they are of the most consolatory character. But if Paul had believed that after all mankind shall have been made alive in Christ, and shall have received the heavenly image, they will be arraigned at the bar of God, and tried and sentenced,

some to eternal bliss, and others to never ending burnings, how shall we account for his profound silence on this subject—especially where he is speaking of the time when this grand inquisition is supposed to take place?

Another argument to prove the erroneous application of the parable of the sheep and the goats, arises from its intimate connexion with the twenty-fourth chapter. It should be remembered that the division of the books of the new testament into chapters and verses, is a work of comparatively modern invention. Now, if you will carefully examine the whole of the twentyfourth and twentyfifth chapters, you will find that they contain a history of but one discourse, which relates exclusively to the destruction of Jerusalem and the circumstances that were to grow out of that sad catastrophe. In fact, we might include in the discourse of which we are speaking, the concluding part of the twentythird chapter; for the Saviour there says, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord."

The historian then informs us, that after Jesus had thus expressed his deep commiseration for this devoted city, he departed from the temple, and his disciples came to him for the purpose of fixing his attention upon that splendid and magnificent edifice. Jesus then said unto them, "Verily I say unto you, there shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down. And as he sat upon the Mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying,

Tell us when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" You will please to recollect, my hearers, that the parable of which our text is the concluding sentence, commences with these words "*When the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father*," &c. This fact, if attentively considered, will show that the whole merit of the controversy, as to the proper application of the text, turns upon the following question, *When* was the Son of man to come? For it was at that time the goats were to go away into everlasting punishment.

The answer which we shall deliberately return to this question is, that the coming of our Lord took place before the expiration of the first century of the christian era. And the authority on which this answer is given, you may find, Matt. xvi. 27, 28, "For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father, with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works. Verily I say unto you, there be some standing here which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom." Again, in Luke ix. 26, 27, "For whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words, of him shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he shall come in his own glory, and in his Father's, and of the holy angels. But I tell you of a truth, there be some standing here, which shall not taste of death till they see the kingdom of God." In tracing the answer which our Lord gave to his disciples, touching the sign of his coming and of the end of the world, we find him fixing the time for the occurrence of these great events, within the limits of the then existing generation of men. "Verily I say unto you, this generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled." Among the signs which were to precede his coming, are included

wars, and pestilence, and famine, and persecution. The gospel was to be preached in all the world, or throughout the Roman empire. The abomination of desolation, or the standard of the Roman armies, was to appear in the holy place. These were to be the signal for the immediate flight of his faithful followers into the neighboring mountains. A scene of suffering which baffles the powers of description—a scene of suffering unprecedented in the annals of the world, and which is never to have a parallel, was then to follow; and the history of those times will show how minutely these predictions were fulfilled. Having proved that the coming of our Lord was an event which has taken place nearly eighteen hundred years ago, we have consequently disproved the correctness of the common application of our text. For it was at the *time* of this coming that the unprofitable servant mentioned in verse 30, was to be cast into outer darkness, and when the persons named in verse 46, were to go away into everlasting punishment.

"But," perhaps it may be asked, "did the world end before the generation in which Jesus lived, had passed away?" The world, embraced in the question which the disciples proposed on the mount of Olives, did most assuredly. But what did the disciples mean by this word? They signified by this term, the age or dispensation. A very superficial acquaintance with the Greek language, will enable any person to see that age, or dispensation is the proper rendering of *aion*, which is rendered world, in Matt. xxiv. 3.

The Mosaic dispensation continued "while the temple lifted its gilded spires toward the heavens —while the victim bled in its courts, and ascended in flames from off its altars. The temple at Jerusalem, was a proud testimony of the Jews' prerogative. On its altars, the fire had burned

for centuries. Jehovah had descended in the cloud and filled the house with his glory. Here was the Ark, the Urim and the Thummim; here the God of Israel had placed his name. The cherubims stretched their wings over and covered the mercy seat; and Jerusalem boastingly claimed an exclusive prerogative, and was proudly proclaimed the only city of God." But, with the destruction of the temple and the dispersion of the Jews, the dispensation of the law had ceased forever. And all this took place at the coming of the Son of man.

We now pass, as was proposed, to point out the inconclusiveness of one of the most plausible arguments which modern theologians have used in support of the doctrine of endless misery. The argument to which we allude, is founded on the identity of the Greek word which is rendered everlasting and eternal in the text. Hence it is said that "the destruction of hell would be the destruction of heaven;" or in other words, the same arguments which would prove the limited duration of punishment, would be equally conclusive against the perpetuity of bliss in a future life. But, brethren, it does not require any extraordinary share of mental acuteness to perceive that the whole force of this objection, lies in a downright naked assumption. For we have proved the twentyfourth and twentyfifth chapters of Matthew, to relate exclusively to the present state of existence. "What! do you mean to say that men can enter into the enjoyment of eternal life, while they are in this tabernacle of clay?" Yes, we not only mean to assert, but we intend to prove it. "Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that believeth on me, *hath* everlasting life," John vi. 47. Again, "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent," John xvii. 3. It is under the

reign of Christ, or in the kingdom which he has established here on earth, that eternal life is enjoyed by all true believers, who are the proper subjects of this kingdom. And it should be remembered, that when men are translated into this kingdom, they are said to "pass from death unto life."

But, brethren, the term *aionion*, rendered eternal and everlasting in our text, is confessedly equivocal in its signification, and therefore does not necessarily imply an endless duration. As it is an adjective, it must, from the very laws of language, belong to some noun, expressed or understood; and the noun must of course determine the extent of duration intended by this doubtful phrase. Scarlett remarks that the word *aionion*, as an adjective, occurs seventyone times in the new testament. The common translation has rendered it once *ever*, fortytwo times *eternal*, three times *world*, and twentyfive times *everlasting*. "But that *aionion* does not mean endless, or eternal, may appear from considering that no adjective can have a greater force than the substantive from which it is derived: thus *black* cannot mean more than *blackness*; *white* cannot mean more than *whiteness*." "The word *aion*, as a substantive, occurs one hundred and twentyeight times in the Greek testament; sixtysix times in the singular, sixtytwo times in the plural number. In our common translation, it is rendered seventytwo times *ever*; twice *eternal*; thirtysix times *world*; seven times *never*; three times *evermore*; twice *worlds*; twice *ages*; once *course*; once *world without end*; and twice it is passed over without any word affixed as a translation of it." "If *aion* means *age*, and its plural *ages*, (which none either will or can deny,) then *aionion* must mean *age lasting*, or duration to the *age* or *ages*, to which the thing spoken of, re-

lates. That this is the meaning of the word in the Septuagint, will not be disputed by any one that recollects the *everlasting* covenant of circumcision, made with Abraham, (Gen. xvii. 13;) the *everlasting* covenant of priesthood with Aaron, (Num. xxv. 13;) or, the *everlasting* statute of the day of atonement, (Lev. xvi. 34.) It would be a contradiction both to scripture and common sense, to ascribe eternity to those things, merely because they are said to be of aionion duration; for it is evident that the aion, or *age*, to which all these things related, is experienced and gone; the aionion covenants and statutes, &c. are waxed old and have vanished away."

Again--We would remark that we do not rest our expectations of unceasing happiness in a future world upon the meaning of the equivocal phrase *aionion*. No, brethren, we have a much better foundation for our hopes. Our gracious Master has said, (see John v. 26,) "For as the Father hath life in himself, so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself;" and in verse 19, of chapter xiv. he says, "Because I live, ye shall live also." From these testimonies, we perceive that the cause of our life is endless, and of course as long as that cause exists, our life, as a consequence, will follow. Hence an apostle says, "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is."

But lastly, we were to prove the final salvation of the very persons of whom it is said "these shall go away into everlasting punishment." These persons, it will be recollected, were the unbelieving Jews. Now, we contend that the final recovery of this unfortunate race was intimated by the Saviour, in immediate connexion with the prediction of their sufferings. For after he had

said, "Behold your house is left unto you desolate," he adds, "and ye shall not see me henceforth, until ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." Does not this language imply that they shall, at some future period, perceive that Jesus is the true Messiah mentioned by the prophets, and bless him for his pardoning grace? Whatever may be your opinion, the great apostle to the Gentiles, in chapter xi. of his epistle to the Romans, has established this conclusion, beyond a reasonable doubt. He shews, that the unbelief of the Jews was the immediate occasion of the call of the Gentiles to the faith and consolation of the gospel; and that if so much good was produced by their fall, an incalculably greater blessing would result from their recovery. "If the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fulness? For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be but life from the dead."

The salvation of the house of Jacob was a subject in which the apostle has manifested a peculiar interest. He says, "My heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved. For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God." Paul appears to have been desirous that his Gentile brethren should suppress every rising emotion of boasting or exultation, over this devoted and unfortunate race. "For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceit, that blindness, in part, is happened unto Israel, until the fulness of the

Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved, as it is written, Then shall come out of Zion the deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob.'"*

* The time which shall have intervened between the making of the declaration, "Behold your house is left unto you desolate," &c. and the bringing in the fulness of the Gentiles, marks the duration of the punishment which is called eternal in our text.